

## CRITICAL BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Semantics of Blessing and Cursing in Ancient Hebrew*, by J. K. Aitken. Ancient Near Eastern Studies Supplement Series 23. Louvain: Peeters, 2007. Pp. xv + 306. ISBN 978-90-429-1986-2. Hardcover. €85.00.

Dr. James K. Aitken is the Academic Director of the Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations of the Wolf Institute of Abrahamic Faiths at the University of Cambridge. *The Semantics of Blessing and Cursing in Ancient Hebrew* is part of the ongoing research by the *Semantics of the Ancient Hebrew Database Project* (SAHD). The book is organized into two main parts. The first, entitled "Introduction," contains a literature review, dealing with the contemporary theoretical framework for semantic studies. The second deals with the pertinent lexical entries. This book is brief but comprehensive with an up-to-date bibliography. Aitken includes a specialized selected bibliography and a set of indexes of sources, authors, and words.

The introduction to the book is divided into two sections. The first deals with semantic theory and the field of blessing and cursing (pp. 3–22). The second section provides an inventory of textual evidence (pp. 23–41). Thus, in the first section, Aitken carefully and critically reviews the state of the art in semantic studies theory and practice before embarking on the study of the semantics of blessing and cursing in the Ancient Hebrew corpus. He tries to critically interact with a comprehensive set of approaches, including primitive anthropology, magic, the evolutionary approach, speech-act theory and pragma-linguistics. The work of the relevant authors is discussed and their arguments and conclusions are evaluated. Aitken detects in his review that theology has often affected semantic studies prejudicially.

Primitive anthropology, as a framework for semantic studies, is seen as insufficient. T. Plassmann's suggestions of the origin of blessing and cursing semantic in an ideal of the early nomadic life is not sustained by Israelite evidence (p. 7). Additionally, the proposed evolutionary stages of devel-

opment suggested by J. Pedersen are taken from studies on Teutonic peoples and are not supported by evidence from Israelite sources (p. 8).

The approach of magic *versus* religion as framework for the semantic of blessing and cursing that J. Hempel suggests, has its origins in an evolutionary approach to the study of Israelite religion. According to this approach, if the curse mentions God, it is a religious context but if it does not, then it should be considered a magical context. Aitken suggests that what is advocated as magic in the OT by this approach better fits within the OT portrayal of false religions (p. 11). Additionally, there is evidence that a western understanding of magic is being applied by theologians to similar kinds of studies (p. 11). Evidently, the approaches analyzed so far are evolutionary in their presuppositions and systematizations.

Speech-Act theory has also been tried as a framework for the study of blessing and cursing in ancient Hebrew. Aitken reviews the views of S. O. P. Mohwinckel, A. C. Thieselton, and L. Dürr related to the case of the dual meaning of דָּבָר as "word" and "thing" and he rules out a speech-act base here due to the very possibility that the Hebrew mind did distinguish between these two nuances of the word (p. 12). In Israelite society, the effectiveness of blessings and curses is dependent upon it "being uttered by the appropriated person in the appropriated circumstance" (p. 14). In this sense, it seems that speech-act theory is indeed limited. Aitken quotes B. Nitzan's studies in Qumran where blessings and curses have their "source of power in the Deity; hence these benedictions and maledictions may be considered prayers" (p. 15). Therefore, it seems that there is a basis for the "identification of the role of God in guaranteeing blessing and cursing..." (p. 16).

Aitken then moves to pragma-linguistics (pp. 17–21). As the Hebrew text is often vivid in its portrayal Aitken finds there the field for pragmatics to provide the needed information based on the "grammatical features of the passages concerned" (p. 18). These grammatical features are found in textual markers such as the provided example in Gen 4:11, involving the usage of וְעִתָּהּ in a deictic way which, according to Aitken, actualizes the command (p. 18).

Therefore, "to some extent words are power-laden, but this is not inherent in the words themselves but rather in the conventions of their use" (p. 21). Following this, Aitken discusses the relationship between semantics and social conventions as reflected in the text of the Hebrew Bible, involving issues of who said what, when and why (p. 22).

The second section of the introduction deals with the inventory of the textual evidence (pp. 23–41). The data includes textual evidence that covers a time-frame spanning from "the period of ancient Hebrew up to, but not including, the formation of Mishnaic Hebrew, although the evidence of

Rabbinic Hebrew is noted when it sheds light on ancient Hebrew" (p. 23). Inscriptions, texts from the Hebrew Bible, Qumran and Ben Sira are included.

Etymology, although still a matter of discussion, is brought into consideration and especially in the case of *hapax legomena*, as well as all available comparative Semitic sources, when the evidence is scarce. This includes even sources in Akkadian and Arabic. The morphological distribution of the lexemes is considered in their analysis. The syntagmatic relationships between the lexemes are analyzed especially in Aitken's study, including also aspects such as word order, word frequency and the frequency of syntactical structures (pp. 28–29).

Aitken recognizes that the use of evidence from the old versions is controversial and problematic and even so, he considers the available evidence from the Septuagint, the Peshitta, the Targum and the Vulgate. The limitations, issues and advantages related to each of these versions are carefully reviewed in order to contribute to the analysis of the evidence (pp. 30–37).

The lexemes chosen by Aitken for this study were selected following the criteria of semantic fields, a concept which the author carefully analyzes. A brief discussion of the rationale for the chosen nouns and verbs that are included in the study follows (pp. 38–40).

Part two of the volume (pp. 45–252) portrays twenty-one entries dealing with the lexemes pertinent to the old Hebrew semantic field of blessing and cursing, including nine verbs and twelve nouns, which are discussed in alphabetical order. Each entry is analyzed following a sevenfold procedure that provides multiple perspectives on each lexeme, taking advantage of current linguistic tools of Hebrew. This study exemplifies the state of the art in Hebrew linguistics as applied to semantic studies. The analysis includes an introduction to the lexeme that provides the grammatical type of the lexeme and the statistics of its usage throughout the textual corpus under consideration. Textual issues, if they are present (and they are, see pp. 45, 56–57, 64–65), are discussed here. Finally, the first section of the analysis follows with a consideration of the lexeme's root and of all available comparative material for lexical-etymological purposes.

The second section of the analysis exhausts the discussion of the formal (morphological) characteristics of the lexeme as attested in the available textual corpus.

The third section proceeds to the detailed description of the syntagmatic features of the immediate contexts of the lexeme in the texts where it occurs.

The fourth section describes and analyzes the available information derived from the old versions. It includes the discussion of this evidence against the background of the issues related to these versions as disclosed

previously (pp. 30–36). This is Aitken's strategy to deal with the limitations and contemporary issues related to the usage of versional textual data in relation to OT and Hebrew language studies.

The fifth section deals with the analysis of the lexemes with reference to the relevant lexical/semantic field(s). As a given lexeme might fit into more than one semantic field, this discussion becomes relevant as the justification of the lexeme's placement. The section also sets the lexeme in perspective as well as exploring possible aspects of polysemy and diachronic semantic development (semasiology).

The sixth section, exegesis, takes advantage of the information and insight provided by the previous sections and discusses them in addition to any other relevant issues. The discussion is made against the backdrop of the literature review previously made in the general introduction of the book. Any relevant element from the reviewed approaches is noted.

Finally, at the end of every lexical entry, Aitken elaborates his conclusions, based on the evidence he has already provided. Aitken is careful in the way he works in this section as made evident from those instances when the evidence points toward a lexeme as performative (pp. 55, 177), declarative (pp. 116, 242, 249), apotropaic (p. 83) or just as the recognition of a condition (pp. 87, 158, 192, 205).

This is a reference book that requires the reader to have a working knowledge of intermediate Ancient Hebrew language and an awareness of the current issues on Ancient Hebrew linguistics. As a reference book, it is exhaustive, systematically organized, concise and represents the state of the art in its field.

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*Accordance Bible Software 8: Scholar's Standard Level*, by Oak Tree Software. Altamonte Springs: Oak Tree Software, 2008. Macintosh compatible software. DVD. US\$ 249.00.

I came to know about Accordance through my Greek professor who considered it the best Bible software. It was only after a year that I had the opportunity to test his claim. The present review offers a general and brief introduction to the Accordance software with a special focus on the *Scholar's 8 Standard Level* edition of Accordance. It will also point out the advantages and disadvantages. The final observations will include a personal recommendation.

There are five different versions offered by Oak Tree in order to make the use of the software convenient for the user. The *Starter Collection* con-